# The Japanese American Internment and Redress
Madison, Wisconsin
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On May 16, 1942, our family (my father, mother, brother, sister, and I) arrived at Manzanar, California after a five-hour train and bus trip. Our new home was a tar-papered barrack building, 20 feet wide and 100 feet long. The room to which we were assigned, Block 19, Building 9, Section 2, was one-fifth of the barrack building and was therefore 20 feet by 20 feet. To our surprise, we did not have that barren room to ourselves. A mother and teenage son had also been assigned. After a couple of weeks, reassignment resulted in our family having the room to ourselves — a welcomed event. On the first of July, we were able to move to Block 32, Building 3, Section 3. On July 6, or about six weeks after we entered Manzanar, we had linoleum placed on the floor. That was another event. As might be anticipated, there was very little in the way of furniture or other niceties in the rooms. In fact, for the five of us, there were five folding canvas cots, five folded canvas bags, and ten brown 100% wool (and scratchy) blankets. We soon found that the canvas bags were to become our mattresses. We each went to a central location and filled the bags with straw. My mother was the only wise one of the bunch, and we laughed at her. She almost overfilled her canvas bag. We lauged because we could visualize her rolling off her "mattress." The following day, the rest of us followed her example. In between, we found that the so-called mattresses were almost squashed flat by morning.

Human beings are remarkably resilient and accommodating. We soon became used to the wind and dust storms, the food that was served cafeteria style, the camp-type living, and all of the different kinds of hardships present in concentrated living quarters. Some sense of the phenomenon is available when you read a letter I wrote almost 40 years ago to non-Japanese American friends when I was about to leave Manzanar to go to Chicago.

There were ten relocation centers/concentration camps that were built very quickly. Undoubtedly, the general layouts were about the same. There were two in California, two in Arizona, one in Idaho, one in Wyoming, one in Colorado, one in Utah, and two in Arkansas. Each Block was the same. There were housing units (five per building); a double-barracks building for a mess hall; a half-building for a boiler room and communal laundry; and a half-building for communal showers, toilets, and wash basins. Male/female divisions were present. For families, the facilities were atrocious. For women, they were unbearable. You can imagine the shock experienced by girls, women, and elderly women when they saw that there were no separations between showers or between toilets -- there was absolutely no privacy. Children accommodated very quickly. However, the older girls, women, and elderly women, had a difficult time. In fact, in some instances, they stood patiently in line outside the building and allowed use of facilities on a one-at-a-time basis. Some took showers late at night or very early in the morning. Eventually, men were able to scrounge materials that could be used to section off toilet seats. Still later, they were able to section off showers. Still later, they were able to construct large bathtubs.

The assault to dignity was indescribable. The housing unit was really one large bedroom occupied by all persons assigned to the units. There was no screening; there was no privacy. By scrounging string and using safety pins, we were able to use blankets as sliding screens. Coping was difficult but not impossible.

Quickly developed were school, adult education, and recreation programs. Again, they were developed on a make-do basis -- not luxurious but usable. Work was also made available very quickly. Naturally, there was immediate need for carpentry since all the barracks had not been completed. Also, food service and sanitation jobs were required to be filled immediately. Subsequently, men and women were working in factory-type arrangements making mattresses, camouflage nets to be used by the armed forces for gun enplacement, and clothing. Jobs were also available to raise a substitute for rubber, which was then scarce, called guayule. Other jobs became available in farming, assuring adequate water supply, police, fire, and teaching. A camp hospital was established, as was a cooperative store.

Schools first started with a corp of volunteers as teachers, including myself. Since each Block had a mess hall, they were used between meal service. After an education department was established, buildings in a specified Block, were recycled into a school. Separate classrooms were then possible. Adult education, however, continued on a mess hall by mess hall basis so that participants would be able to attend classes within their own Blocks. Thus, some semblance of community was maintained, each Block being a subcommunity. The matter of distance was a factor. Four-Block-groups were separated from other four-Block-groups by wide expanses of desert land called fire breaks. Fortunately, Manzanar did not experience any fire of major proportion. A few grass fires occurred, as did fires confined to one or two housing units, but they were efficiently contained.

Adult education classes covered all kinds of topics from English and Writing to Japanese language to crafts, creative writing, speech, social dancing, square dancing, and basic education. Actually, when five or more people wanted a course in almost any subject area, attempts were made to meet the need. The mess halls were used for religious services initially, but soon specific buildings were designated as churches as inhabitants were transferred to other locations.

Recreation activities abounded. In the fire breaks, those who so desired could engage in outdoor sports. In the evenings, there were loud speaker record concerts. Most were contemporary music, but others were classical. As time went on, outdoor movies were provided, with moviegoers having free seats on the desert sand. Mess halls were also used for dances and for the giving of plays. Indoor games were also available -- ping pong, checkers, chess, and cards. Those who were into poker, pinochle, and the like were able to do some minor gambling, but most people I knew did not have much money anyway.

With respect to money, the prevailing pay was modest. Professionals, such as teachers and doctors, received $19 per month. Supervisors, foremen, and skilled workers received $16, and most received $12. Of course, that was in addition to free food, free lodgings, and free medical care. That sounds like very low pay; however, note should be made of the fact that at that time, Army draftees were receiving $21. Receipt of small wages might be expected to result in a leveling out of status. However, society being what it was, the status disparity between persons who received $19 a month and those who received $16 or $12 was great. Establishment of a cooperative storem, enabled stretching of funds and availability of products other than through the mails. Mail order purchase from Montgomery Ward and Sears Roebuck was very high in volume.

The physical conditions required accommodations that were made by most. A few people had much more difficult times of it than others. Social psychological conditions were something else again. A variety of negative psychological burdens were present. Foremost was, of course, the fact that evacuation occurred regardless of the safeguards we had thought were in place in the United States. The social distance between residents and staff (or administration) was always present. Close living created problems. Family-related social institutions deteriorated through the community living influences. Family units lost their importance. Family heads were obviously impotent. Children did not have to eat with their parents. In fact, unless either or both parents were mess hall workers, parents did not do the cooking or the serving of food. The barbed wire, sentry towers, flood lights, and arms carried by soldiers whose jobs were to keep the residents confined, were ever-present reminders that freedom of movement was limited to the perimeter of the camps.

Less than nine months after being established, Manzanar had a major disturbance when internalized pressures erupted camp-wide. On December 6, 1942, a resident was beaten up and the attacker taken to the camp jail. A protest meeting was held, and a resident committee was proposed to obtain release of the attacker. A considerable amount of loud discussion resulted in a large group of people who began to shout loudly and move toward the administration buildings to denounce suspected informers or snitches, all categorized as "inu" -- dogs. Military police were summoned, and the crowd refused an order to disperse. Name calling, verbal threats, and loud shouts led to heightened feelings on both sides. Of course, one side had rifles, shot guns, and revolvers.

To give a flavor of personal reaction to the tension, I quote from a diary I had made of the occasion: "Shizuo and I headed toward the administrative housing. It was very dark. At about 50 feet from the house, we heard someone say, 'Halt!' We walked on one more step. Then, we saw a soldier. He said, 'Halt!' again. We stopped immediately without questions. Then, he presumably cleared his rifle for action -- we heard the bolt click. He called for someone by the name of Percy or something. We supposed that he was the corporal of a guard or something. He did not show up. The sentry asked us to state our business...Shizuo kept quiet. I said that we wanted to see Mrs. Adams and then I 'stated our business' while Shizuo and I stood very still with arms held rigidly at our sides. He let us pass, but he followed us with his enormous (so it seemed to us) gun. After that, we left the vicinity quickly...In fact, we were so eager to make our departure, that we tripped over some cactus plants."

That night, residents congregated again, people got excited, and shots were fired. Residents were killed. The following day, Monday, December 7, martial law was declared in the camp. There was a lot of plotting and scheming going on. My father, who worked at the Mess Hall and therefore heard a lot about what was happening, said that a band of ruffians, who were in practical control of the residents, had made a black list consisting of about 70 names. My name was on that list, so both of my parents were quite worried. Terrorism is not easy to control and in the camp atmosphere, terrorist tactics were very successful. To heighten the oppressed atmosphere, all residents were told to wear something black on their clothing to denote mourning for people who had been killed or wounded. The atmosphere was tense. Persons who thought their names were on the black list were, however, not as disturbed as their families. My name was probably on the list because I had taken issue a number of times with persons expressing violently anti-American sentiments. In less than 10 days, the Spanish Consul was in the Camp to make a personal inspection and to talk with residents and administration. The tenseness continued for about three weeks. Memorial services were held on December 20. Tensions continued at a high level until about the middle of January. A month later, a visiting team of army men, three sergeants and one first lieutenant visited the camp to register all persons (American citizens, aliens, men, women) over 17. Opportunity was provided for voluntary enlistment into the Army. There was a lot of soul-searching, especially by non-citizens. At the time (1943), Japanese were among a small group classed as aliens ineligible for citizenship. Thus, if they renounced Japanese citizenship, they would be without any citizenship. Again, residents were in a turmoil.

As is so often true, words cannot express how some of us felt. Words cannot reflect the anguish, philosophic musings, and the occasional agony required to take a stand on moral, ethical, or patriotic issues.

I close with a quotation from my April 22, 1943 letter to the local Selective Service Board in Los Angeles: "Today, I received a notice of classification from your Board which stated that I am in the IV C Class. Just for the records, I would like to protest that action because I was born in Los Angeles; consequently, I am a citizen of the Unite States. I would like to register my protest against the action which has been taken by all local boards in putting Americans of Japanese ancestry in the IV C Class. A blanket order such as that is not in keeping with the principles for which the United States stands."

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